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SENSITIVE
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TAGS: PGOV PREL PHUM PINR CT
SUBJECT: TRIP REPORT FROM VISIT TO NDELE, SOKOUMBA AND NGARBA

1.(SBU) SUMMARY: Ambassador and Management Officer traveled to Ndele and Ngarba, Central African Republic (CAR) from 12-15 February, 2009 to:

-- Investigate reports of the arrival of a new armed or rebel group in Ndele and the relationship of this group to reports of increasing ethnic conflict between the Goula and Rounga tribes.

-- Confirm reports of thousands of Central Africans fleeing as refugees to Chad.

-- Investigate reports that the Central African Armed Forces (FACA) were burning villages north of Ndele on the road to the border town of Ngarba (aka NGarba-Bord).

After meetings with many different parties in the region as well as visits to every village between Ndele and the Chadian border, AmEmbassy Bangui can confirm:

-- There is dangerous conflict between the Goula and Rounga tribes, but this conflict may be being used as a cover by a new rebel group, something even more dangerous.

-- While the numbers of Central African Refugees initially reported to be in Chad are exaggerated, the final number could well reach 10,000.

-- The FACA are not burning or looting villages, but have probably massacred approximately twenty villagers in one location and have probably beaten and killed at least two others.

2.(SBU) All of these events risk having tremendous negative impact on the nascent peace process in the Central African Republic. The Ambassador discussed his trip with President Bozize. END SUMMARY

3.(SBU) On Friday, 12 February, 2009, Ambassador, Management Officer, Local Investigator and two drivers departed Bangui in two USG vehicles for Ndele. They were accompanied by the U.S. citizen director of the Non-governmental Organization International Medical Corp. (STRICTLY PROTECT) Upon arrival in Ndele, the group met with members of the delegation sent by the Sultan (also the Mayor) of Ndele to negotiate with the rebels. The members of the delegation were representatives of various

Christian and Muslim churches and mosques in Ndele. They reported that the FACA prevented them from taking the road from Ndele towards Ngarba, the town on the Chadian border. They had thus bypassed the FACA and circled around in the bush. They reported thousands of people in hiding for fear of the FACA after it had massacred some twenty people, including the Chief (Chef du Village), at the village of Sokoumba. Allegedly, the FACA arrived during the funeral of a child, ordered the men to strip off their clothes, and then shot them. They reported that they were told by the people in the bush that the bodies were buried in a common grave, but that they themselves had not been able to reach the village or find the grave. They showed digital photos of the makeshift camps in the bush and dirty water in the shallow wells that people were digging.

4.(SBU) The next morning, Ambassador called on the Sultan, Senoussi KAMOUN. The Sultan is a well established political figure, his family having been in the area for generations. He is also the mayor of Ndele and thus, in principle, represents the Bangui government. (See 08 Bangui 172) According to the Sultan, the "rebels" are breakaways from the UFDR who arrived from Bria and that none are from Ndele. He believed that the focus of the problem was in Bangui, not Ndele as he identified the leaders of the rebels as being former members of the Presidential Guard. Most of the rank and file were said to be ex-UFDR who broke away after the signing of the peace accords with the CARG and are mostly Chadians or Sudanese. He mentioned that some are Saras from Chad who have been living in Rounga villages in the CAR.

5.(SBU) While calling this a "Bangui Problem," the Sultan repeatedly stressed the danger that arises from these rebels

BANGUI 00000046 002 OF 004

operating against the backdrop of longer term conflict between the Goula and Rounga tribes and quickly recounted the alliances and conflicts between the two groups, going back at least a decade. Points of unity and conflict include cattle raids against and from the Sudanese (the two tribes had not always come to each other's defense), diamond mining rights (Goula driving the Rounga off the diamond fields), and various individual killings and compensations. (This may relate to distribution of payments by the CARG to the UFDR to end the rebellion.)

6.(SBU) The Sultan claimed to have been negotiating with rebels with some success but stressed that military actions by the FACA would be counter productive as they would only hurt the civilian population and cause them to flee. He stressed the conflict could not be resolved at the level of the Minister of the Interior and urged the Ambassador to solicit direct engagement by President Bozize. The Sultan said that the conflict must be resolved quickly; using the mediation of the traditional sheikhs, or it risked spreading across the entire Vakaga. The Ambassador promised to share his observations and message with President Bozize.

7.(SBU) Following the meeting with the Sultan, the Ambassador met with the commander of the FACA in Ndele, Commander NGREPPE. Also present was Lt. TOUNDAM of the Presidential Guard. The Commander reported that he had been in the area for about four months and that the present problems had begun in Bria. He said that his troops had clashed with the rebels along the road from Ngarba to Ndele and that he had suffered three fatalities and several wounded. The rebels are well armed with AK-47 assault rifles and rocket propelled grenades (RPG), as well as the usual homemade weapons. He could not estimate a number, but said that most were Chadians or Sudanese and not Central Africans. He noted that the ranks swelled with recruits during the course of their trip from Bria; some of these being forced recruits who are used as porters. After his losses, his troops returned to Ndele, reorganized and counter attacked. He said that it was following this attack that the population fled. Ambassador told the Commander that he was about to take the road to Ngarba.

8.(SBU) Like the Sultan, the Commander stressed that the rebels

were led by some ten or more former members of the Presidential Guard and that this was a "veiled rebellion" hidden by behind ethnic conflict. He further noted that the rebels had at least five Thuraya satellite telephone numbers. He implied that the Sultan was not negotiating in good faith and was struck that the rebels swore in the name of Allah. Thus, for him, there was an Islamic element to the rebellion.

9.(SBU) Ambassador took the opportunity to stress the need to protect the civilian population and to warn that any outrages against civilians, besides being a violation of human rights, would simply strengthen his enemy. The Commander responded enthusiastically, saying that this was just what he had always said.

10.(SBU) Ambassador and party then departed up the road to Ngarba. During the first twenty kilometers, the party passed normal, occupied villages. After that, the villages were deserted save for a few unhappy farm and domestic animals. The houses were all locked. Pausing to explore one village, we encountered two wary young men, armed with a spear and a machete. They said that, following the killings at Sokoumba, the population had fled into the bush in fear. They were guarding the village against possible looters. Party continued, village by village, until Sokoumba.

11.(SBU) In Sokoumba, the party found what appeared to be a small number of bloodied clothes, coagulated blood in the sand in drag marks, as well as about fifty shell casings (AK 47 and a larger cartridge of the same caliber) in a small area. There were no indications of combat; only one possible bullet impact on a wall, no buildings damaged, destroyed, or burned. Following the drag marks behind the house, the party found an unusual mound of earth; some two/three meters wide and four/five

BANGUI 00000046 003 OF 004

meters long, roughly in the shape of a figure of eight; or two adjacent holes. The mound was surrounded by a double row of bricks, pried from a ruined building, and the mound was topped by two woven mats of the type used as rugs or walls. A very small number of shell casings and bloody clothes were found elsewhere in the village. There were no inhabitants other than animals and, as before, everything else appeared completely normal. Large quantities of straw and bricks had been collected in preparation for dry season repair of houses. The only thing unusual was the absence of the people.

12.(SBU) Party continued to village of Akoursoubak, where they discovered the straw buildings composing the Eaux et Foret (Water and Forest) guard post at the southern entrance of the village completely burned. The village was deserted and there were no overt signs of the battle between the rebels and the FACA which reportedly took place in early January. There were no empty shell casings or bullet holes in buildings, nor did any building show blast damage. In the center of the village approximately 10 buildings were burned, leaving only their charred brick frames. Found amongst the ruins were burned Islamic and Catholic papers as well as a burned French grammar book. After about 10 minutes a couple of villagers emerged from the bush and said that everyone, fearing their safety, had fled to the town of Ngarba on the Chadian border.

13.(SBU) The group continued up the road 40 kilometers to Ngarba, passing many similarly deserted villages. On the way, they passed a handfuls of fleeing people carrying their belongings on foot or bicycle. When the party arrived in Ngarba, they were surprised to find it completely deserted. Continuing through the small town, past the abandoned police and government offices, they reached the river that forms the border with Chad. People on the bank reported that everyone, including all CARG government officials, had fled across the border into Chad and were housed in a refugee camp three kilometers north of the border. The border was undefended, not patrolled and not delineated. There were a few people down by the river helping refugees across by pirogue [local wooden boats] or on foot. A UN vehicle from the High Commission for refugees (UNHCR) was on

the Chadian side. Members of that organization came across to the CAR by pirogue and said that they had registered over 5,000 refugees, mostly women and children. The UNHCR in Chad subsequently confirmed that refugees continued to arrive at a rate of approximately 150 per day. From NGO reports of immunization campaigns, we believe that as many as another 5,000 may be hiding in the surrounding country and making their way to the border.

14.(SBU) That evening the party met with a group of Ngarba residents who came over to sell food and discuss the situation. All expressed great fear of the FACA following the Sokoumba killings, especially as their Chef de Village was the first to be killed. They reported that the Imam of Akoursoubak had been killed by the FACA, along his assistant. They further reported that mosque was one of the buildings burned. The villagers alleged that the FACA arrived with lists of suspects and began beating people in an attempt to gain information. People were very angry and contrasted the behavior of the FACA with the allegedly better behavior of the Chadian armed forces. The following morning the party departed for Ndele. Upon reentering Ndele, there was a follow up meeting with the Sultan as well as a meeting with the Sous-Prefect for the region. The Sous-Prefect said that people on the western road out of Ndele were fleeing as well, but in smaller numbers. He also noted that the people in the bush had no potable water. He went on to say that food prices in Ndele were rising as with the neighboring villages empty, there was not enough food arriving. He said that he, "feared hunger in Ndele." Ambassador and Party returned to Bangui on Sunday, 15 February.

15.(SBU) On Tuesday, 17 February, Ambassador discussed his trip and observations with UN Secretary General's Special Representative, Francois Fall, and French Ambassador Jean-Pierre Vidon. Both were distressed at the latest turn of events and both expressed the greatest pessimism for the negative impact on

BANGUI 00000046 004 OF 004

the nascent peace process. The French Ambassador found conditions in Ndele especially worrisome as two major rebel leaders who had signed the peace accords and participated in the Political Dialogue, Miskine and Saboun, had just released a statement in Tripoli in which they threatened to take up arms again. (COMMENT: A threat which was, in fact, carried out on Saturday 21 February.) Ambassador Fall reported great frustration in dealing with the follow-on to the National Dialogue. The APRD leader Demafouth was seeking to be put in charge of the disarmament and demobilization of all rebel groups. This is most unusual as he, himself, is the leader of one of those groups. No one had any real information on the prison break at Bosambele, but all agreed that it was a tremendous blow to the prestige of the Bozize regime that anyone could conduct a successful attack upon one of the CARG's strongest garrisons, only about 300 kilometers from Bangui. Fall and Vidon were both extremely pessimistic about the future of peace in the CAR and agreed that the Ambassador had to brief President Bozize on his trip to Ndele, reported SEPTEL.
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